

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Jan. 11, 2008

Contact:

*Judith Ingram, Communications Director,  
(202) 523-3240, ext. 127*

WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom urges President Bush to raise the critical issue of ongoing Saudi violations of the freedom of religion and other human rights when he meets with Saudi leaders early next week. According to National Security Advisor Steven Hadley, the president's trip to the Middle East will highlight the U.S. government's "work in the region to combat terrorism and extremism, promote freedom, and seek peace and prosperity." The President should stress that respect for religious freedom and other human rights is an essential component of ensuring a stable, democratic, and peaceful society that guards against terror and extremism.

"President Bush should be emphasizing that the Saudi government must significantly improve its performance in matters of religious freedom and other human rights if it is to enjoy a true partnership with the United States," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie.

President Bush should call specifically for the release of all religious prisoners in Saudi Arabia, including 17 Ismailis in Najran who have languished in prison for terms ranging from more than seven to 14 years. One Ismaili, Hadi Al-Mutaif, has been imprisoned since originally being sentenced to death for apostasy in 1994 for a remark he made as a teenager that was deemed blasphemous. He is serving a life sentence.

The Commission sent a delegation to Saudi Arabia in May-June 2007 to assess how far the Saudi authorities have progressed in implementing their previously articulated commitments to improve the climate for religious freedom. In July 2006, the U.S. State Department and the Saudi government confirmed a set of policies intended to decrease the grave violations of religious freedom in the Kingdom and the state-abetted export of extremist textbooks and teachers that promote religious hatred and intolerance the world over. Despite the failure of the

Saudi government and the U.S. State Department to respond to the Commission's requests for copies of these textbooks, the Commission has recently received some Saudi textbooks from other, independent sources and is currently reviewing them to determine whether they still contain highly intolerant material.

The Commission found that in spite of its pledges to reform, the Saudi government persists in severely restricting all forms of public religious expression other than the government's own interpretation and enforcement of a strict school of Sunni Islam. This violates the rights of the large communities of Muslims from other schools of Sunni Islam, as well as members of the Shi'a community, who comprise 10-15 percent of the population in Saudi Arabia, and the two to three million non-Muslims residing in the Kingdom.

Even private worship is affected by the strictures. Over the past year, dozens of members of the Shi'a community in the Eastern Province have been detained for up to 30 days for holding small religious gatherings in private homes. Nearly a dozen British and American pilgrims, including two minors, were detained and held overnight by members of the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV) in Mecca in August 2007 after hours of interrogation and verbal and physical abuse. The pilgrims were detained only after it became known to members of the CPVPV that they were Shi'a.

The Saudi government continues to grant unwarranted power and impunity to the CPVPV, whose members harass, detain, whip, beat and otherwise mete out extrajudicial punishments to individuals deemed to have strayed from "appropriate" dress or behavior. Many Saudis believe that members of the force will never be prosecuted for violations of others' rights, including criminal actions, because they are protected by members of the religious establishment and the Royal family. Despite an increase over the past year in the number of investigations of abuses by members of the religious police, members have not been held accountable and the courts have dismissed several cases that have been prosecuted.

The Saudi government's harsh enforcement of its interpretation of Islam, together with other violations of freedom of religion, adversely affects the human rights of women. The Saudi government has continued discriminatory measures aimed at the destruction, rather than realization, of many of the human rights guaranteed to women. In one of the most recent egregious cases, a woman was convicted and sentenced last fall to 200 lashes and six months in prison because, immediately before she was raped by seven men, she was found alone in a car with a man who was not her relative, which is illegal in Saudi Arabia. She escaped the sentence only because King Abdullah pardoned her, but he also said he believed the punishment for the alleged crime was appropriate.

"The Commission sees an unmistakable gap between Saudi promises and performance," Cromartie said. "President Bush must strongly press the Saudis to ensure that their actions match their words."

**The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie

,